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ABSTRACT

The potential for writing across the curriculum programs to oppress or to liberate students lies in the dualistic approach to such programs: (1) highlighting humanism, where writing is seen as enhancing the learning process in all academic disciplines, and (2) teaching the conventions of different communities. Few scholars would object to the first point but the second one raises several problems concerning where and how these conventions are to be taught. Instructors in the various disciplines complain that there is not time to teach these conventions and at the same time explain and call attention to their constructedness. Further, elementary composition is not an ideal location for examining this constructedness since it is also the place where some students struggle to grasp standard English. Not only do students entering composition classes within the English department face the hurdle of Standard English--a task that reinscribes the class system--they also must master the conventions of various disciplines in order to succeed, which is a further sorting mechanism. The solution to these difficulties may be writing centers, which offer a place where students and staff can interrogate what John Clifford class the "hundreds of minor and arbitrary truths that are taken for granted, unchallenged, accepted as inevitable" in the structure of academic discourse. Contains 10 references. (TB)

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Writing Centers:
Straddling the Line Between Oppression and Liberation

In 1979, John Rouse responded vehemently to Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations seeing her work with basic writers as politically oppressive, as stripping the writers of their own voices. Gerald Graff continued the debate in 1980 conceding that exposure to the conventions of Standard English a la Shaughnessy could be seen as socializing for the power elite but still contending that "to shield students from this socialization on the delusion that you are liberating them helps nobody" (852). Graff argued that while analysis and detachment may serve inhuman ends, they also can be used as weapons against inhuman ends, an age-old argument going back to St. Augustine's On Christian Doctrine. We therefore, the argument goes, should not deny students access to the privileged discourse of Standard English but attempt to teach it in a way that empowers them. I begin my paper about the political implications of writing across the curriculum with the debate surrounding Shaughnessy since writing across the curriculum arose out of the effort to address the by-now mythic literacy crisis that Shaughnessy was responding to in the 1970s. I

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contend that writing across the curriculum poses the same question that indoctrination into Standard English asks. That is, in the words of David Russell, "What discourse communities--and ultimately, what social class--will students be equipped to enter?" (507) I want to explain the possible political implications of writing across the curriculum and to touch on the pivotal role of the writing center.

Usually we hear about the politics of writing across the curriculum in terms of faculty and funding. Should English departments house writing across the curriculum programs or not? Where will the money come from to fund a writing across the curriculum program? How will proponents of writing across the curriculum convince those who have not taught writing as a component of their courses that such teaching is a worthy and achievable enterprise? In spite of the politics surrounding the implementation of writing across the curriculum programs, such programs appear to have taken hold in many higher education institutions. The Modern Language Association Commission on Writing and Literature reported as far back as 1987 that "nearly half of four-year colleges and universities responding have some form of cross-curricular writing instruction in place" (Ackerman 340). The phrase "some form" is an important one in terms of the political implications of writing across the curriculum for students.

The potential for writing across the curriculum to oppress or to liberate students, and I use the term liberate with

caution, lies in the dualistic approach to such writing programs. Robert Jones and Joseph J. Comprone explain the dualism of writing across the curriculum programs: highlighting humanism, where writing is seen as enhancing the learning process in all academic disciplines, and teaching conventions of different discourse communities. Both approaches contain inherent political power.

Few of us, with our common interest in writing and our belief that writing is beneficial to students in the learning process, would find fault with writing across the curriculum as highlighting humanism. Yet we also must remember as John Clifford writes that "the teaching of writing is inevitably an ideological act and thereby one part of any culture's attempt to reproduce itself, both intellectually and economically, by creating accommodating students who are eager to fill designated positions of influence within various institutional landscapes" (39). A way out of the indoctrination of students would appear to lie in one standard writing across the curriculum practice: journal writing, a teaching practice John Ackerman found prevalent among writing across the curriculum programs that he studied for his own work on whether or not writing to learn holds the power we accord it. Ackerman points out that even a seemingly non-oppressive assignment such as journal writing carries ideological and political implications: "The informal, ungraded, dialogic, expressive assignment carries with it cultural values of self-expression and interiorized inquiry,

just as report writing, critiques, summaries, and proposals carry with them values and epistemologies rooted deeply in professional and cultural practices" (361). Ackerman explains that students from certain cultures may not value "instruction that takes the form of interpersonal interference. . .(so that) informal, expressive, and exploratory writing practices may be an affront to some writers as much as an invitation to personal discovery learning" (351). Even a humanistic, self-expressive mode of teaching, therefore, privileges certain cultures and hence certain students over others.

While we could not find figures for all institutions of higher learning, it seems that most universities and colleges do not engage in the "decentralized" form of writing across the curriculum, as Dennis McGrath and Martin Spear term it, that I have been discussing. By decentralized, I mean writing programs not run by the English department, that is writing across the curriculum in the humanistic, writing to learn sense that incorporates all academic departments. Tulane, for example, at least partially engages in writing across the curriculum, with the requirement that students take one writing intensive course other than first-year composition, which is taught within the English department. Unfortunately, Tulane defines writing intensive only as a course that requires one paper be revised, and apparently not all departments offer such a course so that some students not majoring in English return to the English department in order to fulfill the requirement.

Recognizing that students may not be receiving explicit instruction in the conventions of disciplines of other departments, some composition instructors have taken such instruction upon themselves thereby engaging in the second form of writing across the curriculum of merely teaching conventions of different discourse communities. For example, some instructors have their students write lab reports for the social sciences, teaching students, as well as one outside the discourse community of the social sciences can, the conventions of the discipline.

The problem with the mere teaching of conventions, however, brings us back to Shaughnessy's basic writers. Clifford writes that while "traditional grammar instruction functions as an almost pure ritual of control and domination, it also serves as an effective sorting mechanism for race and class discrimination, with poorer students always already speaking and writing incorrectly" (47-48). Not only, therefore, do students entering composition classes within the English department face the hurdle of Standard English--a task that reinscribes the class system--they also must master the conventions of various disciplines in order to succeed, which is a further sorting mechanism. Jimmie Killingsworth claims that the nineteenth-century power structure widened access to education but raised the hurdles one had to jump in order to complete successfully the educational process. Perhaps the mere teaching of a discipline's conventions as a component of

first-year composition performs the same task by making it more difficult for students to achieve the academic literacy required to succeed in the class and privileging those who already have mastered Standard English. Russell claims, "By relegating systematic writing instruction to the margins of academic work, outside the specific disciplinary contexts where students are taught to enter coveted professional roles, institutions preserve standards of excellence and reduce social equity" (27). In other words, those students whose language backgrounds allow them tacitly to pick up the language of a discipline are more likely to succeed than students whose language experience require a more "conscious, discipline-specific language instruction" (Russell 18).

And, of course, expecting the English department to instruct students in the conventions of different disciplines holds many political problems as well, turning English departments even more into service departments, but this is an issue for another paper.

Only extreme self-consciousness on the part of the instructor as to how the discourse community conventions convey and generate knowledge and an open acknowledgment of the ideological issues present in writing instruction can save writing instruction from rote socialization that automatically privileges the present power structure. Russell reminds us that "we must not only understand how a discipline constitutes its discourse but also understand how students learn the

discourse of a discipline, how writing plays a role at various stages in their initiation into that community" (301).

Why should faculty bring such self-consciousness to instruction in writing within a discipline? Such self-consciousness rids students of "the naive view of language as transparent record of thought or physical reality," allowing students to see how the language we use in discourse constructs that discourse or discipline (Russell 10). Self-consciousness on the part of faculty removes the notion that their discipline's conventions are transparent and rhetoric free, which has led faculty "to mistake the inevitable struggles of students to acquire the rhetorical conventions of a discipline for poor writing or sheer ignorance," according to Russell (18). Again, such an attitude privileges the better-educated student who is capable of picking up on the discourse conventions without explicit instruction. Russell also claims that "only such sociorhetorical analysis, discipline by discipline, will provide a foundation on which to construct meaningful generalizations about how writing works--and how students learn to make it work," a necessary analysis if we are to implement genuine and effective writing across the curriculum (14).

Noam Chomsky claims that "students ought to know the standard literacy language with all its conventions, its absurdities, its artificial conventions, and so on because that's a real cultural system, and an important cultural system. They should certainly know it and be inside it and be able to use

it freely" (90). Yet how do students learn to use the standard literacy language freely? A lack of explicit instruction in a discipline's conventions makes the student "believe that these are the only reasonable choices, that these norms are firmly in place, that the personas, values, and expectations saturating the discourse and classroom behavior reflect the allowable parameters of disciplinary reality. . .Thus the governing conventions, rules, and rituals of a particular discipline become naturalized and institutionalized," according to Clifford (43). Such unexamined immersion in conventions is precisely James Sledd's objection to Chomsky's statement; we must analyze such conventions more critically making clear to students the worldview behind such conventions and pointing to the constructedness of the language of the discipline. For, as Russell writes, "To read and write meaningfully, one must, in other words, understand how the community interprets its texts, those shared understandings. . .which connect text to context. Using the conventions of a genre without understanding (tacitly or explicitly) how those conventions operate within the community is as meaningless as learning how pieces move in a chess game without knowing the conditions under which one piece may capture another or knowing that the object is to checkmate the opposing king" (13). We as instructors must not assume students tacitly understand, though, since such an assumption puts some students at a disadvantage; it is our job to be explicit about how the conventions of our discipline operate.

And this brings us back to the politics of writing across the curriculum at the faculty level. Last fall during my tenure as Writing Workshop Director, I participated in a session entitled "The Importance of Writing" at the President's Conference on Teaching at Tulane University, a conference for Tulane faculty on various aspects of teaching. The encouraging signs consisted of the good attendance at the session from a variety of disciplines and the fact that the other presenter was not from the English department but from the social sciences. What was missing, however, was any discussion of the socialization inherent in writing instruction. Instead, professors expressed concern over sacrificing course content to writing and dismay over students' lack of writing ability. The political implications of writing across the curriculum for students never surfaced and were displaced by political, and very real, concerns over to whom the responsibility of writing instruction belonged and how one would find the time to deal with the burden of grading or at least reading writing assignments. The self-consciousness Russell calls for was absent, and my guess is that Tulane is not unique in this regard.

In the absence of such self-consciousness, writing centers provide a space where analysis of discourse conventions can occur. Clearly the writing center is not an adequate substitute for self-conscious instruction on the part of the faculty, especially for example in regards to the problems of acculturation and journal writing. Yet writing centers offer

a place where students and staff can interrogate what Clifford calls the "hundreds of minor and arbitrary truths [that] are taken for granted, unchallenged, accepted as inevitable" in the structure of academic discourse (43). The standard tutor question of "Why did you choose to do this part of the paper this way?" can lead to discussion about the construction of a discipline's discourse conventions and an examination of how such conventions not only communicate the knowledge of a discipline but constitute it.

I believe this goal of examining discourse conventions is one that the composition instructor who teaches lab reports is attempting. Yet the writing center is a better place for such instruction for several reasons. One reason has to do with the relationship between the tutor and student. The power structure in the tutor/student relationship, which involves collaboration not graded evaluation, is quite different from that in the instructor/student relationship. Also, eliminating the task of teaching the conventions of different discourse communities in one catch-all class--first-year composition--lowers the hurdle, so to speak, allowing students the time to master Standard English before moving on to the more specialized languages of literary theory, science, etc. Lastly, the writing center is a place of communication, a location where disciplines inevitably meet with tutors seeing assignments from almost all departments and communicating with professors in a number of disciplines.

In closing, I would like to bring us back to the debate surrounding Shaughnessy. I see the same political arguments made about basic writers as being present in writing across the curriculum. Rouse's concern over mere indoctrination into Standard English is a concern we should share over mere indoctrination into discourse conventions since such instruction privileges the class structure and fails to create critical thinkers.

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